

## **Hamit Bozarslan, Révolution et état de violence. Moyen-Orient 2011–2015**

(Revolution and state of violence. Middle East 2011–2015)  
(Paris: CNRS Edition, 2015), pp. 304, ISBN 978-2-271-08206-0

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An historian and a political scientist, Hamit Bozarslan has been studying the Middle East for more than a quarter of a century, and has spent the last few years thinking about the issue of violence in this part of the world. He is teaching several courses devoted to this topic at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris).

In his latest book, he is analysing the social and political dynamics currently reshaping the Middle East, which have been strengthened and accelerated by the 2011 Arab Spring. Though Bozarslan describes this area as a space expanding towards the East (Afghanistan, Pakistan) and the South (Sahel) – these two regions being more and more integrated into the Middle East in terms of political influence and human flux – most of the book is dedicated to the Arab countries. Iran and Turkey (two countries the author studied for many years) are virtually absent from the analysis, along with Israel. Other important players missing in this book are the Western Powers, Russia and China, and here is probably the most controversial aspect of Bozarslan’s thesis. According to him, the current situation in this part of the world, including the collapse of several Arab states, can be explained “essentially by internal dynamics” (p. 14). In the introduction of his book, he seems to support the idea of an end to the post-colonialist era due to the 2011 revolutions (pp. 10–12), and put the accent on the relative Western withdrawal during this period of time (pp. 12–13). If one can understand the refusal to indulge the temptation of blaming the West for everything happening in the Muslim World, and appreciate the emphasis put on the free will of the Middle-Eastern peoples, one cannot simply ignore the contribution of the colonial legacy and of the current structuring of the international system in shaping the state, society and economy in these countries. For instance, the author insists on the pre-colonial beginning of the centralised state in Egypt and Tunisia (p. 71), but what about the colonial interferences on the ulterior development of the state institutions, and on the development of the economy (abrupt ending of industrial take-off and development of an agriculture oriented towards the international market)? In another part of the book however, Hamit Bozarslan admits the role of the threat represented by Israel and the “imperialism” in the building of authoritarian Arab regimes during the 1950s (p. 60). From there, it is difficult to accept the idea that external factors can only exacerbate the internal dynamics

(pp. 14–15). Probably one should understand this choice to emphasise the internal factors as a ‘thought experiment’, which has the advantage of pointing out the internal contradictions within these societies (class struggle, opposition between centre and periphery, construction of communitarianism and of tribalism).

Indeed, when most of the studies of the Arab Spring are focusing on one particular group of actors (the youth, political Islam, the military) or on conjectural elements (the new media and the social networks), the originality of Bozarslan’s work resides in the attempt to understand the ‘big picture’ animating the whole Middle East. The method of the author is comparative in nature, based on a historical sociology of the states and the societies, taking into account the long term (the author is claiming the heritage of Ibn Khaldūn, de Tocqueville and Marx), and analysing history as a “continued and cumulated process of brutalisation” (p. 30), in line with Simone Weil and Walter Benjamin. If this approach favours the study of the structures (states, social classes, confessions and tribes), it does not neglect the actors and the agency of individuals.

His main thesis is related to the two notions and the tension in the title of the book, namely, “revolution” and “state of violence”. The former is borrowed from Frédéric Gros, and designed a regime with blurred boundaries between different security agencies, private and public actors of security, external and internal violence (p. 21). The second notion is interpreted as a ‘configuration’ (in Norbert Elias’ meaning), during which an “heterogeneous coalition” confronts a stalled order, quickly redefined as an “old regime” (pp. 17–20). For Hamit Bozarslan, most of the Middle East has been living in a “state of violence” since the beginning of the 1980s, and the Arab revolutions challenged the *status quo*, producing different outcomes in each national context, leading to the collapse of the most fragile states and forcing the others to reinvent themselves in order to survive.

In the first chapter, the author examines how the widening of the social gap and the lack of ideological legitimacy of the Arab regimes after decades of ‘Arab socialism’ led to the rise of social and democratic protest movements. These movements eventually led to the creation of a ‘revolutionary coalition’, allowing the building of a ‘people’, that is to say an alliance of the centre and peripheries, the middle class and popular categories, the young and old, the men and women. All the movements from the opposition took part in the uprisings, regardless of their ideological stances, but one should notice that the Islamists often seemed to be a step behind the leftist and liberal opponents.

Bozarslan focuses then on the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, which are characterised by the existence of an old centralised state and by the peripheral role of the tribes in politics, in contrast to Yemen and Libya, where the state is recent and weak and the tribes stand at the heart of the political life. Both Tunisian and Egyptian regimes were short on projects and ideologies, only trying to legitimise themselves through security issues. The revolutionary moment sees these stalled states facing the “revolutionary coalition” described in the previous chapter. The elites then decided to sacrifice the head of the state in an attempt to save the system. After the fall of the man symbolising the regime, most of the protesters seemed to be satisfied with the maintaining of the existing institutions. At that time, the conservative Islamist forces appeared as the most capable to maintain the social order, and consequently won the elections. In so doing, and because they revealed themselves unable to solve the social issues, they triggered a *Kulturkampf* around axiological issues, occulting

the social ones. Both sides of the society radicalised during this phase. The Islamists were trying to implement *shar'ia*, while the left was putting emphases on individual freedoms. Proving themselves unable to bring back stability to their countries, the Islamists were then abandoned by the other conservative forces, and forced to step back from power by the secular bloc (conservatives and leftists altogether). This path of events was violent in Egypt, and more peaceful in Tunisia.

The third chapter is devoted to the so-called 'domino effect' throughout the Arab world. For the author, this effect resulted in the reception of the same "revolutionary call" in different local contexts (p. 109). Here, a table describes, country by country, the most important "structural and conjectural data": geographical divides, communitarianism, tribalism, cross-border flux, structure of the power, civil and political society, and the opposition (pp. 112–114). This comparison shows how the Gulf States succeeded in maintaining their internal stability, by a mix of brutal repression and a larger distribution of rent profits, while Algeria, Jordan and Morocco contained the protests because of strategic concessions to the opposition. But in Palestine, changes in the regional environment weakened Hamas. Most importantly, the collapse of the Libyan state accelerated the disintegration of the society along tribal lines, while in Syria, the revolution degenerated into a civil war with a strong confessional element. In Yemen, both tribes and confessions are part of the conflict and are fighting each other. Iraq and Lebanon are subject to growing inter-confessional tensions, with the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds gaining in autonomy. Only two pages are focusing on the situation in non-Arab countries: Pakistan and Afghanistan (pp. 162–163). A big part of this chapter is devoted to the Syrian civil war (pp. 139–150), with a table recapitulating the situation since March 2011, by a succession of 12-month cycles (pp. 142–143). This table shows how the level of violence, the development of jihadi groups and the implication of external actors grew together.

Since 2011, change has accelerated and become chaotic: the regimes have lost control over it, and some of the ancient social forces (tribes, jihadis), have managed to take advantage of this new context. Even before the revolutions, the Arab states were gaining in autonomy *vis-à-vis* their societies, but were at the same time losing their grip over them. This autonomy allowed Tunisian and Egyptian deep states to be left relatively untouched by the changing of the governments following the 2011 revolutions. But they had to reinvent themselves and their relationship to societies, and this process of reconfiguration is still going on. In Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, the states quickly redefined themselves as paramilitary forces. They precipitated chaos in order to survive in offering their protection to certain fragments of the population. Al-Qaïda took advantage of this situation, being a major actor, able to protect sectors of the society shunned by the state. The first experiment of territoriality by this organisation was in Mali, but the most accomplished one has been in Iraq, then Syria, with the creation of the Islamic State (a dissent branch of Al-Qaïda). The author analyses this organisation in terms of generations of jihadis, from the Arab fighters in Afghanistan during the 1980s, to the current war in Syria. He discusses the thesis of Bernard Rougier<sup>1</sup>, who opposes Shia Islamism – local and organised in militias – to Sunni Islamism – transnational. But now, argues Bozarslan, Shia militias have become transnational as well (with Iraqi soldiers and Hezbollah

1 Bernard Rougier, *L'Oumma en fragments. Contrôler le sunnisme au Liban* (Paris: PUF, 2011).

activists mobilised in Syria), while Sunni Islamists have created a territorial state. Mobilising Bourdieu sociology, as well as Ibn Khaldûn concepts, Bozarslan defines Al-Qaïda as a "transnational field" (p. 183), with a rudimentary *da`wa* (litt: "call"; here: "cause"), able to attract and inspire fighters from all around the world. During the 'war on terror' in the 2000s, Al-Qaïda successes created a 'jihadi field' organised around this particular organisation which, still being the main actor of this field, is not able to control it any more.

The crumbling of the 'Westphalian model' – particularly salient in the Middle East – is the main topic of the fifth chapter. The "state of violence" became dominant in this part of the world during the 1980s (hunger riots in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia; destruction of Hamas in Syria in 1982; civil war in Lebanon; Iran-Iraq war; Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), before spreading towards the South (Sahel), largely because of the "transhumance" of the jihadi fighters from one battlefield to another. In Nigeria, Mali and Somalia, the collapse of the state offered an opportunity for the jihadis to control a territory. This is the biggest part of the book devoted to the South of the Sahara (pp. 202–209), mainly in relation to North Africa.

Despite the prominent social issues in the Arab world, the class struggle has been concealed by ideological, tribal and confessional fights, following the 2011 insurrections. Indeed, the collapse of the Arab states caused the collapse of the societies. Consequently individuals looked for the protection of the tribes and of the religious communities, which restructured themselves into armed militias. This configuration happened even in Egypt, where the Sinai has partially escaped from the control of the state following the 2011 revolution. Bozarslan thinks that we are probably witnessing the end of a short cycle (started with 9/11), and of a long cycle (started in 1979) at the same time.

The last chapter of the book deals with the 'dramatisation' of the bodies, which plays an important role in the Arab world, not only in the jihadi imaginary (bodies of the fighters and of the martyrs) but also in the narratives of the revolution, starting with the immolation of Bouazizi in Tunisia. But here, the body symbolises the lack of dignity, as an opposite to the 'over-masculinised' body of the jihadis. Also, the female body made its appearance on the political scene following 2011 (pictures of naked activists in Egypt and Tunisia; and in contrast, the body of Asmaa Al-Baltagui, the daughter of a Muslim Brothers leader, killed in Rabaa, and symbolising the martyred virgin). The author analyses the fall of major cities into the hands of jihadi fighters (in Iraq, Syria and Mali) in a khaldunian perspective, the Islamist fighters coming from the periphery, claiming a radical politico-religious *da`wa*, and using violence, confronting a 'civilised' power based in cities, with a worn out legitimacy. This being said, the "brutalisation" of the society is coming not only from the jihadis, but also from secular regimes in Syria and Egypt (pp. 245-252), and the Arab spring is not responsible for the current situation, which results from a long succession of failures, from the Ottoman empire to the contemporary kleptocracies, through imperialist rule and 'socialist' regimes.

Despite the numerous qualities of this book, one should deplore the persistence of some misprints (mostly missing words, especially conjunctions and articles) and of some factual mistakes. For instance, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did not get 65% of the votes during the 2011 parliamentary elections (p. 87), but only 38%, and Tamarod did not claim it had collected 2 million signatures for the resignation of Muhammad Morsi (p. 99), but 22 million! Nevertheless, this occasional lack of

precision does not alter the sense of the argumentation, neither the heuristic character of the theoretical framework designed by Hamit Bozarslan in order to analyse the whole Middle-Eastern situation. Of course, the Arabic-speaker will regret the lack of a proper system of transliteration and the absence of sources in Arabic, but the text is backed by a lot of references indicated in footnotes and in the bibliography. As a whole, the book is really clear and didactic, with five different tables recapitulating diverse points: the different kinds of revolution and their characteristics (pp. 24–25), the state of eight Arab countries in 2010 (pp. 112–114), the four stages of the Syrian conflict (pp. 142–143), the reactions of the Arab states facing the 2011 revolutions (p. 161), and the historical stages of development of the jihadi organisations (pp. 216–217). The volume is enriched by a chronology, a list of important personalities, a list of acronyms, a lexicon and an index. Because of all these characteristics, this book is addressing different audiences, from the specialists of the region to the general public.